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Our Opinion

Government Must Share Responsibility With Press

PRESIDENT Kennedy spoke a few nights ago to newspaper publishers on the need for self-censorship in reporting matters affecting national security. He said cold war foes of this country were culling valuable information from U. S. newspapers. He pointed out at what a disadvantage our government was in the matter of intelligence compared with that of our enemies because of their controlled press.

Earlier, high government officials had told newspaper editors that the American press should share the blame for the fiasco in Cuba. They implied that too much publicity had been given to invasion preparations.

"Our invasion of Normandy during World War II wasn't openly discussed in newspaper for weeks in advance," one speaker noted.

Mr. Kennedy and other administration spokesmen would be hard put to find a newspaper publisher or editor who would knowingly print material damaging to the interests of the country. They could find few unwilling to assume their full share of the responsibility for protecting the nation's security.

HOWEVER, government officials have a responsibility, too. Increased candor on the part of the government could help the newspapers judge what information endangers the national security. In the Cuban affair, for instance, if a responsible spokesman had indicated its nature and scope, the tendencies toward misinformation would have been checked. Instead, complete ignorance was feigned.

Even after this country's part in the affair had become public knowledge, misinformation was prevalent. In one 24-hour period last week, for instance, two ranking administration spokesmen told sharply conflicting versions about the quality of our intelligence on the invasion.

One official said that the Central Intelligence Agency was far off in its estimate of arms available to Premier Fidel Castro and the will of his army to fight. Another official of apparent reliability stated frankly that this was not so; that the CIA made no miscalculations. He implied that the failure resulted from poor military tactics.

Both of these men were talking to editors who had been invited to Washington

to be given an appraisal of this country's position in today's troubled world.

IN HIS SPEECH to the publishers, Mr. Kennedy said that it was vital that the American people "possess all the facts they need, and understand them as well—the perils, the prospects, the purposes of our program and the choice we face."

No one could argue logically with this thesis, but it does pose a confusing dilemma for members of the press as well as the public when two top federal officials present such distinctly opposite versions. Obviously, one of them has to be wrong.

Another example of why it is most difficult for the press to properly evaluate information was a recent speech by Secretary of Interior Stewart L. Udall in which he said that the Cuban invasion plan originated with the Eisenhower administration and was merely carried out by the new administration. The speech was given only hours after a White House spokesman had informed White House reporters that there was not "a word of truth" to the allegations that in backing the Cuban invasion Mr. Kennedy merely was executing the plans of the previous administration.

AS FRANK J. Starzel, general manager of the Associated Press, commented, the type of self-censorship proposed by the President "depends upon newsmen having available guidance from responsible government officials who also will take the responsibility for the effects and results of their decisions."

This is indeed a time for self-discipline on the part of the press, as well as other segments of our society. And as in every other time of national peril newspapers have risen to the occasion, they can be counted on today.

We agree that national security is paramount. Great responsibility is shouldered by the newspapers. But responsibility must be borne, too, by government. It cannot expect the press to exercise the type of intelligent self-restraint it displayed during past emergencies unless it is taken into its confidence and kept fully informed.

Satisfactory self-censorship cannot function in an atmosphere of misinformation.